



wide range of people. However, such an institute could play a very creative role in strengthening the work of existing organisations and in helping to articulate the needs and interests of children'. For purposes of discussion, they refer to such an umbrella body as a 'Children's Institute'. In 1989, the Free the Children Alliance, Western Cape, convened a meeting to discuss this concept.

So far no initiative has succeeded. Several reasons have been identified:

1. Territorialism: there is a fear of being 'put out of business' by a 'super-organisation'.

2. Non-professional groups are concerned that their skills may become redundant.

3. Suspicion of the whole concept of 'information centres' in terms of who would control the information and the possible pre-emption of existing specialist data bases, e.g., in the medical field.

4. Cross-disciplinary rivalries - medics and para-medics vs. educators and para-educators, for example. Who would be dominant in an umbrella organisation?

5. Anxieties regarding who would represent children's interests and how their interests would be represented.

6. Control of financial resources: who would be charged with this responsibility?

7. The problem of semantics: some organisations use terms that others perceive as threatening, such as 'comrade' and 'children's leagues'.

8. Lack of commitment to non-racialism, a

factor which some feel is often concealed.

9. Tensions caused by differing interpretations in the field of child development theory.

10. Adequate and fair regional representation if the body is to be a national one.

SASH set out to explore the facilitation of combining the efforts of existing interest groups and organisations involved with child rights, health, education and welfare, in order to combat the situation with collective clout. In an attempt to explain the various positions on this matter, SASH put the following question to a cross-section of 18 Cape Town-based organisations: 'Is there a need for a structure or body in South Africa to coordinate action towards a better deal for children?'

Incredibly, consensus was achieved with an overwhelming 'yes' from all quarters, who felt that present shortcomings would hopefully be overcome by such a body. These shortcomings were defined as follows:

- An overall research facility is seen as necessary, whose function would be to gather information about children, store it and disseminate it through reports or publications. This would obviate the present non-system of having to consult a myriad organisations and institutions to pool a composite picture of information required.
- There is a gap in the realm of advocacy: such a body could promote public awareness of children's issues and lobby government.

It was pointed out in several replies that such a

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*Children holding FEDTRAW T-Shirts, showing the concern of this organisation for children's rights.*



body should be wary of involvement in the service function, which could be counter-productive to existing efforts of service organisations. It is financially impossible to consider non-governmental alternative service provision on any meaningful scale. However an 'institute' could identify and help to find creative ways to fill the gaps in service provision.

Children's services in South Africa are fragmented into different departments (education, health, welfare, etc.) and there is a lack of interaction between them. A more holistic approach is required, which might be provided by a bridging body.

Existing organisations are perceived as pockets - as carrying out great work but without proper coordinating structures. The net result is that many children are 'falling through the gaps'. There's a need to pool resources and to avoid wasteful duplication of effort, especially in view of the fact that the needs of many are not being addressed at all (e.g., disabled children in rural areas).

Finally, it was noted that individual efforts are OK for fact collecting but, to be effective, strategy requires collective action, must be broad-based, and needs money.

The thorny question of strategy was the cause of much of the diversity of opinion in the past failed initiatives. It would be foolish to pretend that substantial differences do not still exist; nonetheless it is useful to look at the summary of points - some 'do's' and 'don'ts' - ranging from suggestions to upfront stated requirements as they were presented to SASH:

- The formation of this body should start with the concept of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and just South Africa.
- The fact that 'sound practice' and 'sound politics' may be at odds, even while both serve as powerful agents for positive change, must be faced.
- The proposed body should rise above sectional differences and avoid taking on a particular political stance or ideological bias in order to prevent exclusivity, division and fragmentation. A focus on the adoption and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child might serve this end.
- The structure should be accountable to its own aims and its contributors. It should not be an umbrella body with constituents for whom it has to speak: it should speak for itself.
- It should focus on specific goals and objectives, as opposed to being so all-encompassing that the initiative becomes difficult to sustain. The Convention on the Rights of

the Child would be important in providing guidelines and leverage.

- It should avoid drawing distinctions between professional and non-professional personnel in the child care field. Collective action as broadly based as possible is desirable, to include existing organisations whose efforts are all valuable.
- Such a body should be prepared to take a back seat, deriving satisfaction from the increased effectiveness and enthusiasm of its member organisations - avoiding trying to become powerful or a competitor for scarce funds. Emphasis should be on empowerment.
- It should further be aware of the impatience in the active fieldwork organisations of 'initiatives' that are all talk and no short-term action to help children.
- It would need regional representation if it is to be a national body, but not a labyrinthine one that impedes rather than facilitates urgent decision-making.

UWC's Institute of Counselling, Centre for Child Guidance, has expressed willingness to host a working group of professional and community representatives drawn from legal, health, education, social and other services in order to further explore the question of advocacy and the forging of links with research and service provision. This is a very encouraging development.

Achieving a better deal for children is a matter of great urgency. We hope that this article will galvanise all parties into action. One of the respondents to SASH's question summed up this urgency by quoting from a poem by Gabriela Mistral:

*We are guilty of many errors and many faults,  
but our worst crime is abandoning the children,  
neglecting the foundation of life.  
Many of the things we need can wait,  
The child cannot.  
Right now is the time his bones are being  
formed  
his blood is being made, and his  
senses are being developed.  
To him we cannot answer, 'Tomorrow',  
His name is 'Today'.* □

